

White Paper Report

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Project Director: Duane Watson (curator@wilderstein.org)

Institution: Wilderstein Preservation

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COVER PAGE

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National Endowment for the Humanities

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The Wilderstein Historic site received a National Endowment for the Humanities “Sustaining Cultural Heritage Planning Grant” of \$50,000 in the fall of 2012. The purpose of the grant was to assess environmental conditions in the Wilderstein Mansion which houses nearly 98% of the humanities collection. The findings would guide the curator regarding appropriate environmental parameters for collection storage areas and period rooms on the first floor currently accessible to visitors and areas of the second floor not yet available for tours.

A project team of professionals was assembled consisting of Michael Henry, principle, of the engineering firm Watson and Henry; Rick Herschner, Director of Preservation and Conservation at the Shelburne Museum, Shelburne VT; and Alan Balicki, Senior Conservator, The New-York Historical Society, New York NY. The team was tasked to create a plan for a cost effective, low technology, sustainable environment that would provide temperature and relative humidity conditions in the mansion that were within national standards for protecting and extending the longevity of the humanities collections in a 19th century wood frame building.

History of Wilderstein Preservation and the Wilderstein Historic Site

The Wilderstein Historic Site consists of an ensemble of 19th century structures built in 1852/1853 and expanded and added to in 1888-1890. The oldest building, the Ice House, was built in 1852; the mansion, an Italianate Villa designed by architect John Warren Ritch was completed in 1853 and expanded by architect Arnout Cannon, Jr. and the interior decorated by Joseph Burr Tiffany in 1888/1889. The simple villa was transformed into an American Queen Anne confection with a five story circular tower, portcochere, veranda, over 40 stained glass window sashes and lavish eclectically decorated interiors.

Sited high above the Hudson River with extended undeveloped views that still remain, “Wilderstein,” as the mansion and site is known, is the centerpiece surrounded by a Gate Lodge, Carriage House, a Potting House (its 80

foot Lord & Burnham greenhouse now only a footprint), gazebos, two dog houses, a bicycle shed and a root cellar. A boathouse and dock across the railroad tracks separating the site from the Hudson River burned in 1937.

The Wilderstein Historic Site is situated in the Hudson River National Historic District in the Town of Rhinebeck NY, a well known tourist destination. It houses one of the largest archive collections among the great estates in the area.

Wilderstein Preservation, the governing body, is a private non-profit organization formed in 1980 by a group of local friends of Miss Margaret Lynch Suckley, 1891-1991, whose family developed the property and were descendants of the 17th century landowners who settled the area. Because of this long residence, the humanities collection dates to the first decade of the 18th century.

Existing Conditions in 2012

In 1990 Wilderstein began roof work, replacing the red slate from the original quarry and repairing leaking box gutters guided by an Historic Structure Report funded by the Andy Warhol Foundation and prepared by the firm Messick, Cohen, Waite. Following the death of Miss Suckley in June of 1991, and the assumption of full stewardship of the site, exterior work on the mansion continued step-by-step for the next twenty years. Throughout this period, grant funded consultancies and projects for conservation treatment, storage, security and preservation of the collection were carried out by volunteers who described, photographed, archivally housed and entered data into the PastPerfect database which now contains bibliographic records of more than 50,000 items and over 25,000 images. As the years passed, nearly 4,000 costumes and textiles were removed from drawers, trunks, closets and boxes and re-housed in archival boxes. Storage became an issue, particularly as books, archival materials, decorative arts, art, photographs, personal items as well as furniture, household objects and possessions belonging to the extended family made their way to the mansion to be stored in “Daisy’s Attic” filling the house from basement to attic with nearly 200 years of family possessions.

An NEH Preservation Assistance Grant provided funds for dataloggers and a year of temperature and humidity data-gathering as part of an Image Permanence Institute study produced over two years of annual data for

analysis. The exterior of the structure had been restored improving the interior environment. The next logical step was to better understand, improve and sustain an environment that would better protect the collections. The NEH Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections Planning Grant was an opportunity to seek professional guidance to address the need of a large and significant collection in a house with one zone heating, air conditioning limited to fans, shutters, shades and use of an airshaft created when the house was expanded in 1888.

The Project

Grant consultants Michael Henry, Rick Kerschner and Alan Balicki visited the site individually in the fall of 2012 and spring of 2013. Each consultant worked closely with Curator Duane A. Watson who provided them with house plans, the building's history and data-logger charts and led them through the house to look at storage conditions, explaining how the house functioned. Every nook and cranny was viewed, questions asked and information provided. The individual visits were followed in late spring 2013 by a team visit which included a half-day symposium for Wilderstein staff and volunteers, members of the Board of Directors, members of the Curatorial Committee, representatives of local historic institutions and organizations and students from local colleges interested in preservation of humanities collections and historic properties.

The symposium provided an overview of issues presented by the consultants and recommendations. Participants raised questions, made suggestions and interacted enthusiastically during the session and one-on-one and in groups during a break, at lunch and following the meeting. At least one student wrote a paper for a class based on the symposium and the planning process. It was clearly a positive experience for participants, a number of whom expressed their appreciation to the Curator and members of the Board of Directors.

A draft final report from the Consulting Team was received in April 2014 for presentation to the Executive Committee for discussion. The draft report addressed questions raised and recommendations made at the Symposium and presented recommendations, strategies and priorities based on "Reasonably Achievable Environmental Performance at Wilderstein" as described below:

- Strategies for Environmental Improvements

Implementation steps coded by priority:

- (I) Immediate, 1 to 2 years
- (N) Near-term, 2- 5 years
- (L) Long-term, 4 to 10 years
- (C) Continuing or on-going actions

The broad categories for implementation:

- A specific strategy to organize collections by material sensitivity, value and available space in the basement, third floor and attic (C) [Project began summer 2014]
- Improve window performance by continuation of the exterior storm window project (C) [East elevation 3rd floor to begin spring 2015]
- Install light filtering roller shades on second, third floor and attic (C) [24 of 30 windows now complete – 6 to be installed March/April 2015]
- Reduce infiltration of air and moisture vapor with weather-stripping (I) [Project to begin 2015]
- Consider interior glazing with ultraviolet filtering for interpreted spaces (L)
- Continue to manage winter relative humidity by depressing temperature and reduce risk of water damage from heating system (I) [A plan for heating system strategies is being discussed but not yet completed]
- Improve security and relative humidity in basement in archive storage and work areas (I)
- Depress summer temperature in collection zones, 2nd, 3rd floors and attic. (N) [Continue monitoring, using fans, install ventilation panel in tower windows and non-

mechanical air movement in 2015 and evaluate for possible mechanical devices in 2016] (I)

- Enclose boiler room with fire-rated ceiling, fire-rated doors and frames. Provide for additional combustion for boiler. (I) [Project completed January 2015]
- Contract with a fire protection engineer with extensive experience with historic house museums to assess fire risks and recommend improvements for fire prevention, fire detection and fire suppression. Nick Artim, PE, Heritage Protection Group, LLC, Middlebury VT is the recommended consultant. (I). [Nick Artim was engaged in late spring 2014 and provided a 25 page report and plan.]

In April 2014 the Executive Committee and the Board of Directors approved the plan and recommendations. The highest priorities were fire prevention, fire detection and fire suppression as well as the electrical wiring and heating system. A decision was made to engage Nick Artim, to move forward with the recommendations regarding the boiler room and to submit a grant proposal to the New York State Conservation/ Preservation Discretionary Grant Program for \$30,500.00 to implement the first phase of a LED lighting system which would allow us to deactivate 1908 electricity on the 2nd and 3rd floors and attic. Access to electricity on those floors is available using up-to-date wiring in the air shaft. The grant was awarded in January 2015 and necessary wiring completed in March with LED installation scheduled for April 2015.

The report on fire prevention, fire detection and fire suppression was reviewed by the Executive Committee and copies given to all members of the Board of Directors and the Curatorial Committee. A member of the Board who has been actively involved with the NEH Consulting team is leading a task force of Curatorial Committee to review and make recommendations to the Board in June 2015 regarding a plan to implement a phased plan for fire prevention, detection and suppression. The rationale for immediate planning for fire prevention, detection and suppression is based on the fact that it provides the greatest protection of the humanities collections.

The report on the environment in the building places it in accordance with ASHRAE (American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning) standards for collections in B-rated buildings. In addition, as noted above, a number of the Ongoing and Intermediate strategies are already completed or underway. These include the LED lighting and rewiring project for the first floor period rooms; increased light protection, boiler room up-grades, collection storage reorganization and non-mechanical steps to moderate temperature and humidity in storage areas.

Conclusions:

The NEH Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections Grant project not only provided funds to bring on site consultants, experts with experience in sustainable environments and collections and an opportunity to implement some of their recommendations, but it also raised the awareness and increased and broadened the knowledge of staff, board members volunteers and members of the community. In addition, it opened doors to other sources of support from other agencies, foundations and individuals who recognize the commitment of The Wilderstein Historic Site to the long term preservation of the humanities collections and the structures on the site that are an important element of the Rhinebeck community and its long history.